

The Aesthetic Concept of the Beauty in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights

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Keywords: Beauty, Edmund Burke, Aesthetics, Wuthering Heights, Love.

ABSTRACT. This article examines the application of Edmund Burke's aesthetic concept of the *beauty* in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is a theoretical work which study the human passions at the most basic level. Furthermore, it distinguishes the difference between the sublime and the beauty. The beauty is a passion which arouses love and pleasure. In the same respect, *Wuthering Heights* is a story full of human passions and it talks about human sufferings and pleasures. The sources of pleasure are expressed variously in *Wuthering Heights*, for example through lights, colors, smallness, etc. These different elements which are the sources of pleasure in *Wuthering Heights* make it an appropriate novel for the application of the aesthetic concept of the beauty. Thus, this study aims at exploring the different ways on which the Burke's theory of beauty is expressed in *Wuthering Heights*.

1. Introduction

In this article, it is tried to investigate the aesthetic concept of the beautiful in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. The mentioned concept is based on the theories of the eighteenth century Irish philosopher, Edmund Burk. He gave his ideas about aesthetics in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the Beautiful*. This treatise is an expression of a young man's thought that later grew up into an eminent politician. Burke's aesthetic treatise is a study of human passions and studies the two basic passions of the sublime and the beautiful which are based on pain and pleasure respectively. In his study, he carries on to objectively define the concept of beauty and sublime. In order to this, he begins with the experience of human senses. Depended upon the psychological and physiological aspects of each human being, he believes that the physical structure of each human being is alike and consequently the feeling of their taste. "We do and we must suppose, that as the conformation of their organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference" (Burke, 2008, p.13). Moreover, he mentions that "I believe no man thinks a goose to be more beautiful than a swan, or imagines that what they call a Friezland hen excels a peacock" (Burke, 2008, p.15). Clearly, this can be deduced that beauty exists in the mind of the judging subject not in a concrete form in the outside world. Later, he defines beauty as:

By beauty I mean that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it...beauty demands no assistance from our reasoning; even the will is unconcerned; the appearance of beauty as effectually causes some degree of love in us, as the application of ice or fire produces the ideas of heat or cold (Burke, 2008, p.91-92).

He considered the relaxation of the nerves as the ultimate cause of the beauty and called the passion caused by beauty as love. Love is a passion which leads to pleasure. As for the sublime, Burke argued that the beauty cannot have reason as its cause. He added that love is different from desire or lust. Love is that passion "which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything

beautiful” while lust is “an energy of the mind that hurries us on to the passion of certain things” (Burke, 2008, p.91). Burke rejected many theories of beauty as Neoclassical, utilitarian and platonic which embraced proportion, utility and goodness respectively. He believes that the experience of sublime and beauty has the power to carry us away and they are never subjected to the act of reasoning. Burke not only focused on defining the concept of sublime and beauty but also set up a sharp contrast between the concept of sublime and that of beauty.

Burke’s aesthetics is greatly gendered. He argued that sublime is masculine and beautiful is feminine. He highly appreciated female beauty in his aesthetics. He considered Venus beautiful and Hercules sublime. In fact, feminine beauty is in sharp contrast with masculine strength. Therefore, the female sex is usually associated with weakness and imperfection. "They learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness" (Burke, 2008, p.110). Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* heavily complies with this theory. This novel was first published in 1847, however, it was not positively welcomed and it took decades for the work to earn a widespread recognition. The reason of this selection for the study of the concept of beauty is that the work "is filled with human emotions"(Malaibari, 2008, p.12) and this can be an ideal way to fully realize the concept of beauty which is inevitably involved with human emotions.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff, Hindley, Hareton and Joseph are all types of sublime while Isabella, Cathy and Frances are all considered beautiful. The fact that Edgar Linton and Linton Heathcliff cannot be considered as sublime, because of their soft and small features, do not oppose with Burke’s theory because these characters are effeminate. In fact, the beautiful is associated with femininity and effeminateness. Generally, between the two families of Earnshaw and Linton, the Earnshaw members are sublime due to their strength and roughness while the Linton members are beautiful due to their small features and delicacy. As it is clear, Burke has regarded some qualities and properties as productive of the beautiful. In his view the beauty is characterized by love, smallness, smoothness, delicacy, light colors and etc. Thus, this study aims at exploring the different characterizations of Burke's theory of beauty in *Wuthering Heights*.

Love

Burke has considered beauty as a social quality which arouses love and pleasure. He identified two sorts of societies. One is the society of sex in which there is both love and lust and its object is the beauty of woman. This kind of society "answers the purposes of propagation"(Burke, 2008, p. 21) In fact, the only distinction beasts observe with regard to their mates is that of sex. But for men who are creatures of more complexity and are with more mixed passion, the choice of mates precedes that of mere sex. They choose their mates according to the social quality of beauty. Thus, men are absorbed to sex as the common law of nature and due to their biological needs "but they are attached to particulars by the personal beauty" (Burke, 2008, p. 24). Lockwood’s and Hareton’s love to young Cathy and Heathcliff’s love to Catherine can be explained by Burke’s concept of the society of sex. The male characters are attracted to the beauty of the female characters and in beholding their beauty they experience positive pleasure. Hareton is attracted unconsciously to the beauty of Cathy and feels love towards her. In fact, he takes pleasure in beholding the beautiful Cathy. Burke argued that the perceiver is affected with an "inner sense of melting and languor"(Burke, 2008, p.197) and in the presence of beautiful objects his nerves relaxes and "The eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried" (Burke, 2008, p. 101) in beholding objects of beauty. In other words, the perceiver becomes lost in the face of the beauty. Beauty arouses love without any resistance or force but rather through seduction. In a part narrated by Nelly, Hareton is described looking at Catherine in this way, "His attention became, by degrees, quite centred in the study of her thick, silky curls...perhaps, not quite awake to what he did, but attracted like a child to a candle, at last he proceeded from staring to touching" (Bronte, 1992, p. 226). Burke claimed that when imagination is affected with an idea for a long time, it hardly becomes attracted by anything else. Hareton is totally affected by the passion of love that no one and nothing can distract him away from it. The passion of love, Burke added, is capable of producing extraordinary effects. Just like Hareton, Heathcliff loves Catherine from the depth of his

heart. His most pleasure in life is being with Catherine. Catherine's marriage with Edgar and her death cause Heathcliff to experience the loss of love and its extraordinary effects.

Why did you despise me? Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy? You loved me—then what *right* had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you felt for Linton? Because misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it—and in breaking it, you have broken mine. So much the worse for me, that I am strong. Do I want to live? What kind of living will it be when you—oh, God! I forgive what you have done to me. I love *my* murderer (Bronte, 1992, p.126).

Before being betrayed by Catherine, even Heathcliff can be explained by the concept of beauty. However, after Heathcliff is devoid of his love, he radically changes and moves toward a different kind behavior which is justifiable through the concept of sublime. However, in the case of Cathy and Hareton, the extraordinary effects are lead toward propagation and generation as they marry at the end of the novel.

Another kind of society is the general society in which there is only love and its object is beauty. In other words, one may love the beauty of people and animals without any mixture of lust, "that more general society, which we have with men and with other animals, and which we may in some sort be said to have even with the inanimate world" (Burke, 2008, p. 21). It includes good company, lively conversations and endearments of friendship. The general society in *Wuthering Heights* is seen through Edgar's love to his daughter, Nelly's love to children, Isabella's love to her dog and Hareton's love to Heathcliff. In all these cases, characters are involved in a sense of affection and tenderness. For example, Nelly's love toward Catherine is expressed in this way:

She bounded before me, and returned to my side, and was off again like a young greyhound; and, at first, I found plenty of entertainment in listening to the larks singing far and near, and enjoying the sweet, warm sunshine; and watching her, my pet and my delight, with her golden ringlets flying loose behind, and her bright cheek, as soft and pure in its bloom as a wild rose, and her eyes radiant with cloudless pleasure. She was a happy creature, and an angel, in those days. (Bronte, 1992, p.123)

2. SMALLNESS

One of the important features of beautiful objects is smallness. Beautiful objects in comparison to the great and sublime are small and pleasing. In different languages, diminutive epithets refer to objects of love and affection. Even in the natural world, we are fond of animals or birds which are tiny and small. Littleness, merely as such, has nothing contrary to the idea of beauty. "The humming-bird, both in shape and colouring, yields to none of the winged species, of which it is the least; and perhaps his beauty is enhanced by his smallness"(Burke, 2008, p. 145). In *Wuthering Heights*, those persons or objects that are small are considered beautiful. Isabella, young Cathy and Frances are beautiful because of their small features.

She[young Cathy] was slender, and apparently scarcely past girlhood: an admirable form, and the most exquisite little face that I have ever had the pleasure of beholding: small features, very fair; flaxen ringlets, or rather golden, hanging loose on her delicate neck; and eyes—had they been agreeable in expression, they would have been irresistible (Bronte, 1992, p. 9).

Edgar Linton is beautiful not sublime due to his effeminacy. Linton is so small and weak in comparison to the sublime Heathcliff. "You are younger, and yet, I'll be bound, you are taller and twice as broad across the shoulders—you could knock him down in a twinkling: don't you feel that you could?"(Bronte, 1992, p. 44). Edgar seems quite slender and weaker. Heathcliff refers to him as a puny. Young Linton, like his uncle Edgar Linton, is so small and slim in feature. He is not like his father at all, neither in character nor in body and shape. "He took off the boy's cap and pushed back his thick flaxen curls, felt his slender arms, and his small fingers"(Bronte, 1992, p. 159). Burke believes that if one cannot bear to love a small creature, the blame should not fall on his size and we should search for the fault somewhere else, "that objects of great dimensions are incompatible with

beauty, the more incompatible as they are greater; whereas the small, if ever they fail of beauty, this failure is not to be attributed to their size" (Burke, 147).

3. SMOOTHNESS

Another property which belongs to beauty is smoothness. Burke gives a high degree of importance to smoothness as he considers it as the most necessary element:

smoothness: a quality so essential to beauty, that I do not now recollect anything beautiful that is not smooth...Smooth leaves, smooth slopes of earth, smooth streams, smooth coats of birds and beasts, smooth skins in fine women, smooth surfaces of furniture, are all beautiful (Burke, 2008, p. 113).

In fact, smoothness contributes a great deal to beauty. Burke believed that if an object has other qualities of beauty except to smoothness, it cannot please. Rugged, broken surfaces and sharp angles are all contrary to smoothness. There is always a kind of resistance to both motion and pressure. If the resistance to motion reduces, it will cause smoothness. On the other hand, if the resistance to pressure decreases, it will lead to softness. In this case, from smoothness or softness or the combination of both emerges a sense of pleasure which can be called "the beautiful in feeling" (Burke, 2008, p. 107). As pleasure is reached by beholding beautiful objects, one can also reach to pleasure by touching the beautiful objects. In fact, the pleasure of sight is associated with color while the pleasure of touch is associated with softness or smoothness. Therefore, beautiful in feeling refers to the pleasure of smoothness and softness. In *Wuthering Heights*, female and effeminate characters, according to Burke's theory of beauty, are beautiful and their beauty contributes to the idea of smoothness and softness. Young Cathy's brow is described as "Her brow smooth, Her lids closed, her lips wearing the expression of a smile; no angel in heaven could be more beautiful than she appeared" (Bronte, 1992, p. 96). In another part of the novel, when Nelly is narrating Hareton's attention toward the beauty of Catherine, her hair is characterized by the softness of silk, "His attention became, by degrees, quite centered in the study of her thick, silky curls (Bronte, 1992, p. 226).

Delicacy

Delicacy is another characteristic of the beautiful. Beautiful objects should be fragile and delicate. What make women beautiful are delicacy, weakness, fragility and timidity. Indeed, Burke takes account of delicacy as a necessary factor in a beautiful object, "An air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of delicacy, and even of fragility, is almost essential to it" (Burke, 2008, p. 102). In a number of examples in *Wuthering Heights*, female characters share to the idea of beauty by their delicacy and fragility. Between the Linton Family and Earnshaw family, the Lintons are so fragile and weak. In this case, Emily Bronte uses a simile and describes the Linton family as delicate as honeysuckles and Catherine as harsh as thorn, "It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles, but the honeysuckles embracing the thorn (Bronte, 1992, p. 72). In Linton family, not only Isabella Linton shares with the idea of the beautiful due to her fragility and delicacy but also Edgar shares with this idea and his delicacy adds to his beauty rather than sublimity. When Catherine tells Edgar that Heathcliff is worthy of any one's regard, he cannot bear her attention and affection to Heathcliff and bursts into tear. Moreover, Nelly considers Edgar as delicate and fragile as a doll. Young Linton is effeminate, weak and fragile like his uncle. "A pale, delicate, effeminate boy, who might have been taken for my master's younger brother", p. 155).

Delicacy contrasts with the strong sublime and it is a feature not just to be described in human beings. The trees and plants are also included in this realm. Burke uses the concept of delicacy to distinguish between sublime and beautiful trees,

The delicate myrtle, it is the orange, it is the almond, it is the jasmine, it is the vine, which we look on as vegetable beauties. It is the flowery species, so remarkable for its weakness and momentary duration, that gives us the liveliest idea of beauty and elegance. (Burke, 2008, p. 102).

If one notices the description that Emily Bronte has used in *Wuthering Heights*, he or she would understand that not only the people of these two houses are set in total opposition but also the minute surrounding area of these two houses are set against each other. The Thrushcross Grange is surrounded by primroses and crocuses flowers, delicate plants and garden trees. Everywhere is covered with flower and flower pots. Even, the beauty and delicacy of the blue-bells in the Grange Park attract Cathy's attention. "There's a little flower, up yonder, the last bud from the multitude of blue-bells that clouded those turf steps in July with a lilac mist" (Bronte, 1992, p. 177). On the other hand, Wuthering Heights is surrounded by robust trees and thorns. The fir trees which encapsulate Wuthering Heights arouse the passion of the sublime. There are also black currant bushes in Wuthering Heights which are dark, wild and thorny. "One may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun" (Bronte, 1992, p. 4).

4. Light colors

Probably, the first thing you notice in an object at first glance is its color. In this respect, Burke has tried to detect the colors of beautiful objects. For him "the colours of beautiful bodies must not be dusky or muddy, but clean and fair. Secondly, they must not be of the strongest kind ... light greens; soft blues; weak whites; pink reds; and violets" (Burke, 2008, p. 103). Moreover, he considers mixed colors with gradations such as the red and white of the skin are also considered beautiful, "The dubious colors of the necks of peacocks and the heads of drakes are beautiful" (Burke, 2008, p. 103).

Among the female characters of *Wuthering Heights*, Isabella is always distinguished by her light yellow hair and white skin. "I never feel hurt at the brightness of Isabella's yellow hair, and the whiteness of her skin; at her dainty elegance (Bronte, 1992, p. 77)". More interestingly, it is the description of Isabella by Heathcliff who hates her white waxen face with blue eyes. "You'd hear of odd things if I lived alone with that mawkish, waxen face: the most ordinary would be painting on its white the colors of the rainbow, and turning the blue eyes black" (Burke, 2008, p. 62). Linton's hair is light and beautiful. Cathy says that young Linton's hair is lighter than hers. Generally, Linton's family is depicted by their whiteness and civility. At a time when the Earnshaws arrive at Wuthering Heights, their face is out of color, "Catherine took a hand of each of the children, and brought them into the house, and set them before the fire, which quickly put color into their white faces" (Bronte, 1992, p. 45).

In another case, Hindley's wife, Frances, also enjoys the white color. In fact, the white color gives her a kind of pleasure. She asks Hindley not to carpet the room so that she can enjoy the beauty of the white color, "Indeed, he would have carpeted and papered a small spare room for a parlour; but his wife expressed such pleasure at the white floor" (Bronte, 1992, p. 28).

5. GRACEFULNESS AND ELEGANCE

In his categorization of beauty, Burke has considered gracefulness as an inseparable segment of beauty, "Gracefulness is an idea not very different from beauty; it consists of much the same things" (Burke, 2008, p. 106). This sameness shows the close relation between beauty and gracefulness. Indeed, gracefulness is "a small inflection of the body; and a composure of the parts in such a manner, as not to encumber each other, not to appear divided by sharp and sudden angles" (Burke, 2008, p. 106). As it is clear gracefulness avoids any tension or collusion. These features are also evident in elegance, another aspect closely related with beauty by Burke. In his view, elegance is "when anybody is composed of parts, smooth and polished, without pressing upon each other

without showing any ruggedness or confusion and at the same time affecting some regular shape" (Burke, 2008, p. 119). Therefore, this could be concluded that delicate and regular works of arts, elegant building and pieces of furniture according to Burke are all elegant. These elegance and gracefulness can be clearly seen when any one speaks of the Linton family. Catherine knows that Isabella is an elegant girl in comparison to her. "I never feel hurt at the brightness of Isabella's yellow hair, and the whiteness of her skin; at her dainty elegance" (Bronte, 1992, p. 77). Isabella's way of living is so different from that of Catherine. She has lived in Thrushcross Grange with respect and elegance. Her life has been so different from the wilderness of Wuthering Heights. And this difference shows itself when Heathcliff and Cathy decide to get a glimpse of Linton's mansion. Heathcliff is surprised with the beauty and elegance of the house and its belongings.

The light came from thence; they had not put up the shutters, and the curtains were only half closed. Both of us were able to look in by standing on the basement, and clinging to the ledge, and we saw—ah! it was beautiful—a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers. ..Edgar and his sister had it entirely to themselves; shouldn't they have been happy? We should have thought ourselves in heaven! (Bronte, 1992, p. 38)

As it is shown, Thrushcross Grange is an example of complete elegance. Not only the mansion of Thrushcross Grange but anything that is related to it, like its members, share to the idea of gracefulness and elegance. The residents of Thrushcross Grange, the Linton family, are all a source of beauty. They are elegant and spacious in appearance and manner. They wear spacious and beautiful clothes and act in a gentle manner. "He ran to the window, and I to the door, just in time to behold the two Lintons descend from the family carriage, smothered in cloaks and furs" (Bronte, 2008, p. 45).

6. SOUND, TASTE AND SMELL

As there are sublime sounds like thunder, there are also beautiful and pleasing sounds. Burke believes that the sounds which can be categorized as beautiful are endowed with two distinct features,

The first is; that the beautiful in music will not bear that loudness and strength of sounds, which may be used to raise other passions; nor notes which are shrill, or harsh, or deep; it agrees best with such as are clear, even, smooth, and weak (Burke, p. 110).

One can see different examples of pleasing human sounds In *Wuthering Heights*. For example, Cathy's voice is so sweet for Lockwood, "said a voice as sweet as a silver bell" (Burke, p. 175). The sweetness of her voice is compared with the sound of a silver bell which has the features of Burke's opinion of beautiful sounds. Or in another example, Edgar Linton's sound is exactly described in this way, "He had a sweet, low manner of speaking, and pronounced his words as you do: that's less gruff than we talk here, and softer" (Bronte, p. 55).

Moreover, there are also beautiful and sweet tastes and smells in comparison to those bitter counterparts. In *Wuthering Heights*, there are sweet sounds, tastes and smells which arouse the sense of pleasure, "The morning was fresh and cool; I threw back the lattice, and presently the room filled with sweet scents from the garden"(Bronte, p. 68). Likewise, Nelly enjoys the soft and sweet weather while she is at Thrushcross Grange and the beauty of sweet nature gives pleasure to her. She enjoys the spring fragrance.

I set my burden on the house steps by the kitchen door, and lingered to rest and draw in a few more breaths of the soft, sweet air...We were in April then: the weather was sweet and warm, the grass as green as showers and sun could make it, and the two dwarf apple trees, near the southern wall, in full bloom. I was comfortably reveling in the spring fragrance around, and the beautiful soft blue overhead (Bronte, p. 73-249).

7. CONCLUSIONS

A year before Emily Bronte's death, her novel, *Wuthering Heights*, was published in 1947. At the time of its publishing, it mainly led to the bafflement of the most of the critics and their consequent negative review of the novel. However, by the beginning of twentieth century, *Wuthering Heights* became one of the most argued subjects regarding the Victorian age. Until now this work has been explored from different perspectives. And in this paper, it was also tried to investigate another prominent aspect of this novel which was regarding the expression of the concept of beautiful. In this respect, Burke's theory of the concept of beautiful was used and applied to the novel. Burke has argued that all human passions are based on either pain or pleasure. He called those passions which turn on pleasure, beautiful. And in his view, love is a passion which is aroused by beauty. Besides, everyone is attracted towards beautiful objects and feel a kind of love and tenderness towards them. Beautiful objects are not considered beautiful in themselves but rather by the sensation and the effects they arouse in the different senses of the perceiver. As it was shown, *Wuthering Heights* abounds in the passions of the beautiful. There are beautiful objects both in nature and in characters of the novel. It means that Emily Bronte had considered all the aspects so as to create the concept of beautiful in the mind of the reader. She hadn't been just focused on one aspect of her characters whereas she considered all the aspects even the sounds, colors and smells produced by her characters or affected them. Different sources of the beautiful are seen in *Wuthering Heights* which heighten the importance of the novel aesthetically and prove again the ability of Emily Bronte in writing her only masterpiece.

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